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ABSTRACT

This presentation suggests methods for selecting teachers and students for high school advanced placement courses, presenting the course material, and preparing students for examinations. It also discusses some materials that can be used in an advanced placement English course and considers some problems of curriculum revision that can arise when a district decides to offer advanced placement courses. (PGD)

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SETTING UP AN ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAM

PRESENTED TO:

NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

SAT. APRIL 23, 1983

SAN FRANCISCO, CA.

CIVIC AUDITORIUM 4:30 P.M.

BY

JUNE E. STRUEBER, PH.D.

BOARD MEMBER

DUBUQUE COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

EA 017 275

SETTING UP AN ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAM

AN ABSTRACT

Advanced Placement, a course given in high school for superior students who can earn college credit, has expanded over the years to include almost every academic discipline. Many people believe that superior students must be served in the public schools by being offered challenging courses and Advanced Placement is one of the best methods to satisfy the needs of these students.

This presentation suggests how to choose the teacher of an advanced placement course, the students who will be involved and one method used to select them. It also discusses the philosophy and method of presenting the material, preparing the students for the examination and suggests some materials to be used in an Advanced Placement English course. It also suggests some problems of curriculum revision which will arise once a district opts to offer Advanced Placement classes, particularly in English.

I was stunned, flattered and scared to death when my department head at Palm Springs High School informed me in June of 1968 that I would be teaching Advanced Placement English in the fall. Naturally, I raced to UCLA and enrolled in graduate seminars. I felt I had to arm myself further than my Master's degree in American Literature. I was not totally unprepared however; I had been attending Advanced Placement conferences for several years and had been team-teaching a section of honors American Literature with a colleague who taught honors American History. Our program had been successful so I had an idea of what would be required of me and I was anxious to set up an Advanced Placement Program for the district any myself, because I believed thoroughly in the concept.

I shall attempt to lead you through the steps of setting up a program as mine finally evolved. It turned out to be the most efficient and successful program after some problems were ironed out.

First, you must commit the department to conducting an AP program. Then you must decide who will teach it. I recommend a strong, creative teacher who relates well to students and demands high performance. The teacher must be willing to read a great number of written assignments because the heart of any AP program is in the written products--these students cannot simply discuss or argue orally. The goal for the Advanced Placement English exam is that the students be able to write expository essays. The written examination will be the final determiner of whether or not the class was well taught and prepared. Avoid choosing the teacher for political reasons or as a prize for popularity; the AP teacher has to know the subject matter thoroughly and be able to present it well enough to motivate the students to participate.

Once the teacher has been appointed, the students must be selected. The junior classes should be informed that an Advanced Placement section will be available to them for their senior year. The students should be encouraged to apply. I used to take a class period to explain to my junior classes what AP was and suggest that they talk it over with their parents. At the same time, at the professional level, a committee should be formed, composed of English teachers, history teachers, counselors and coordinators, if you have them. Generally the outstanding junior students are known by the staff who can recommend that these students participate. The committee ought to learn a great deal about the students nominated to participate. All objective evidence such as previous tests and standardized tests should be examined so that the students who are in the upper percentile rankings are given the first opportunity to enroll. My experience has been that we cut off the eligibility at the 90th percentile in verbal scores; occasionally, there were so many candidates

that we cut off eligibility at the 93rd percentile. I doubt that our schools have students earning such high scores on standardized tests these days unless they are among your Merit Scholars. Don't rule out the students who are going into math and science--that is very important; these students most often, from my experience, become excellent writers, in fact they tend to have splendid logical thinking abilities yet may not be as outspoken in classes as the students with a flair for language. Some students choose not to speak in class unless forced yet it has been my experience to train valedictorians and salutatorians who never had made speeches previously yet wrote exquisite papers and merely needed a little coaching to deliver their own written work orally. Plan to sign up about 25-30 students but expect to end up with anywhere from 12-18 at the end of the semester. It's a vigorous course and many students will opt out after the first quarter.

The students who ask to leave the program may be youngsters who overloaded themselves, who thought they'd be in an elite group, for whom school work has always been easy, or who shouldn't have been in the class in the first place.

At this point I might warn you that an AP course is a college course taught in high school, not a watered down honors course, therefore, the content and pace are vigorous and the student who tries to hold back the rest of the class by not being prepared or being absent too often should be invited out of the program with no loss of face. I used a contract with the students and the parents to give me leverage. The students and parents should know in advance what is expected in the class and I held meetings with the incoming class and parents in the spring to tell them what the course entailed, to show them the reading materials, the homework assignments, and let them know what the standards would be. The students agreed to produce "A" or "B" level work, by my standards, or leave the class for an honors class or other college prep class. If a student began to work at the "C" level, I issued a direct warning with a letter to the parents; if the student's work didn't improve I made arrangements to reschedule that student according to our contract. I've only had to exclude a student twice: the first one was grateful; the second one begged to stay on and agreed to accept a "C". That student even took the exam, against my judgment;, he earned a "2" on the exam which didn't give him college credit, but he's a practicing attorney today and my friend. He claims he preferred struggling in the AP English class and getting what he could from it rather than not being challenged in the "regular" college prep class and looks back on it as a good experience in his life.

The AP teacher has to be careful that an aura of elitism doesn't develop among colleagues. The AP teacher works very hard; I'd hope by now that school districts provide an extra preparation period for the teacher to be able to counsel, correct papers, research, and do many of the additional chores required by the nature of the level of work and needs of the AP students.

I've discussed the teacher, the students, the selection process but I haven't discussed what to teach. For this seminar, I shall deal with my discipline: American-English Prose and Poetry. I discovered that I would be facing students who read extensively and well--but they didn't write as well because our composition program was weak and not sequential. Introducing AP English into the curriculum required that we upgrade our teaching of composition. The same thing applied to providing an AP History class; history examinations in the United States are written in English even though some social studies teachers prefer to think they don't have to teach English. The examinations the students take require that they be able to write paragraphs and expository essays in literate prose. After all, the students are trying to eliminate taking college English courses and get on to their majors as soon as possible.

We had to examine our teaching of composition and develop the teaching of writing in sequence from k-12. We restudied and rewrote our composition program allowing spaces for college bound students to take advanced composition concurrently with AP or on the junior level, and including narrative writing, story telling, and descriptive writing, in all, about 7 different kinds of writing classes designed to lead from the simplest level to the most complicated. As the AP English teacher, I had to include in the course writing about literature. That was a thread I included as I went about teaching how to read and analyze poetry, drama, essays, the short story and the novel.

AP English teachers have to decide what method to use to teach the course, and it should be one that is comfortable; what critical approach to take--I chose to teach from the Aristotelian philosophy, the intrinsic quality of the selection, particularly regarding understanding poetry. I also preferred to work with genre. My curriculum began with the Spenserian Sonnet and I developed my materials in a chronological direction toward the contemporary writers. When I wanted to make a point about an essay, I used an essayist's work. The students always finished discussion with a written analysis. From the types of errors they made in their own writing I planned the lessons on writing.

Additionally, I believe in preparing students for taking examinations. Therefore, I gave them periodic timed tests to take in class, which I felt would take the anxiety out of facing the AP exam in May. With sufficient practice in having to produce an organized short paper containing no more than 3 structural or spelling errors, AP students can produce literate copy which is acceptable to any educated person. In fact, I found often that their writing was more original and more interesting than many contemporary writers.

I've tried to give you a detailed method for setting up an AP program but I would be remiss if I didn't address materials. The College Board will send you copies of past examinations and from them you can judge what materials would be appropriate to use. You will need to have a good anthology for students' use. I favor Norton's Anthology of English Literature, and suggest that students have their own paperback copies of Shakespeare's sonnets, Milton, Keats, Browning, Faulkner, Hemingway, Hawthorne, Joyce's Dubliners. I also advise having good reference material on hand such as Thrall and Hibbard's Dictionary of Literary Terms, McCallum's Prose and Criticism, Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy, Ciardi's Writing About Poetry. etc. If the budget is a problem, enlist the parents' aide, the PTA, Booster clubs, along with the librarian and learning center teachers' aide--suggesting that students buy a copy of a book worked well for me, but it isn't wise to insist on it--you want to avoid causing problems with the staff, but creative teachers find ways to get the books their students need.

Finally, I have enjoyed teaching AP English and I shared my enthusiasm with my current school district. I addressed the Board and teacher groups and offered to be a resource person to them. The Board took me up on it and instituted our English program 3 years ago in one of our high schools. I have served on the Board for 2 years and during that time we have expanded our program to our other high school and are now including History, Math, and Science. I hope our Foreign Language departments will be included soon. We have also reviewed and revised our methods of teaching writing. We owe it to our brighter students to give them the opportunity to move along at their pace; we must, in public education serve all ends of the continuum and until recently I don't believe we were offering our brightest students the level of education they deserve.

Thank you for your attention. I'll be available to answer questions.